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SUBJECT: PM SHARON BANKING ON U.S. TO SAVE DISENGAGEMENT PLAN

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Following PM Sharon's March 21 meeting with Likud ministers to discuss his disengagement plan, it appears that the Prime Minister may lack the necessary Likud ministerial support for the plan to pass a cabinet vote. Pundits and Embassy political contacts say the PM will need to show U.S. support for the plan, and U.S. recognition of Israeli control over several large settlement blocks in the West Bank to win sufficient Likud and cabinet support. FinMin Netanyahu on March 21 conditioned his support for the plan on an official USG rejection of the Palestinian right of return, USG support for inclusion of several major West Bank settlements inside the fence route, and U.S. acknowledgment of Israel's right to strike against terrorists inside Gaza even after a Gaza withdrawal. Media pundits and politicians believe Sharon is banking on the USG's support for his plan as well as its blessing for Israel's de facto annexation of the settlement blocs of Ariel, Maaleh Adumim and Gush Etzion to sway Likud fence-sitters. End summary.

Likud Ministers Want to be in the Know -- Already

12. (SBU) PM Sharon met with Likud ministers to discuss his disengagement plan on March 21 amid growing concern among his Likud party colleagues that he would leave for Washington to discuss his plan before they would be briefed on it. Sharon reportedly spoke about two different Gaza withdrawal scenarios -- one that would be an almost complete withdrawal from Gaza and one that was more restricted and without withdrawal from the so-called Philadelphi corridor along the border of Gaza with Egypt. In another possible variation, Israel would also dismantle four isolated northern settlements in the West Bank along with a Gaza withdrawal. Few ministers reportedly addressed the session and the Likud ministers will reportedly meet again next week to allow for further discussion. In order to make his disengagement plan more palatable to the right wing of Likud, Sharon reportedly expressed his commitment to seek USG recognition of Israeli de facto annexation of three large West Bank settlement blocks -- Ariel, Maaleh Adumim, and Gush Etzion -- in return for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and from several isolated settlements in the West Bank. Some observers have also speculated that Sharon will request U.S. financial assistance to offset the cost of dismantling settlements.

13. (C) According to media speculation and the statements of various ministers, some ten ministers out of 23 have expressed opposition to Sharon's plan, including five Likud ministers: Agriculture Minister Yisrael Katz, Public Security Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, Health Minister Daniel Naveh, Minister-Without-Portfolio Uzi Landau, and Diaspora Affairs Minister Natan Sharansky. Outside Likud, the four right-wing coalition party ministers oppose the plan: Effi Eitam (National Religious Party), Zevulun Orlev (National Religious Party), Benny Elon (National Union), and Avigdor Lieberman (National Union). Eliezer Sandberg (Shinui) told Ambassador Kurtzer on March 10 that he also would oppose the plan. Several other Likud ministers have voiced opposition, but are considered to be wavering on the plan. They include: Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, Immigration and Absorption Minister Tzipi Livni, Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Education Minister Limor Livnat, and Minister-without-Portfolio Meir Sheetrit. If these four were to join the opponents listed above, the plan would fail in a cabinet vote. It is unclear how many of those wavering Likud ministers would be convinced to support the plan if the U.S. were to publicly support it. Livni was quoted on the IDF Radio station as saying that "Weissglas' meeting in Washington is more important" than the Likud ministerial meeting.

14. (C) PM Sharon has been criticized by his Likud colleagues for not keeping them in the loop on his disengagement proposals. In fact, Public Security Minister Hanegbi complained to Ambassador Kurtzer several weeks ago that Sharon had basically "ignored" his own party when it came to the plan, and had even briefed Labor leader Shimon Peres on it before briefing Likud leaders. Hanegbi underlined that Sharon had made a major mistake by not discussing the plan with Likud. He noted that Sharon could have brought around more Likud members if he had explained the logic of the plan to them, but that he had not tried to do this.

Netanyahu Would Support the Plan -- With Conditions

15. (SBU) On March 21, FinMin Netanyahu announced that he would support PM Sharon's disengagement plan with three conditions premised on U.S. backing:

-- U.S. support for Israel's right to launch "counterterrorism" activities in Gaza even after an Israeli withdrawal, and the GOI's control over land, sea, and air traffic into and around Gaza.

-- U.S. support for completion -- before an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza -- of the West Bank security fence that establishes Israel's control over the settlement blocks of Ariel, Etzion and Ma'ale Adumim as well as the Modi'in road (443).

-- Explicit and official USG rejection of the Palestinian right of return. Netanyahu explained that as long as the Palestinians had the hope of returning to former places of residence within Green Line Israel, terrorism would continue.

16. (C) In a Jerusalem Voice of Israel Radio Network broadcast March 21, Netanyahu announced that "if all three conditions are not met, (he) would not be able to support (Sharon's) initiative." He called on his Likud colleagues to "stand united," to support Sharon's plan, but to "insist" on the three conditions and "secure U.S. support" for them. Channel Ten reporter Raviv Drucker told poloff on March 21 that FinMin Netanyahu skipped the March 21 cabinet meeting in order to prepare his statement to the Likud ministerial. Quoting Netanyahu, Drucker said that Netanyahu told the Likud ministers that withdrawing from Gaza by itself would be a dangerous move as it would reward terrorism. In order to minimize this dangerous perception, Netanyahu aimed to improve upon Sharon's plan. Drucker speculated that Sharon might nominate Netanyahu to head a small ministerial team that would implement the disengagement plan and obtain Washington's concurrence to his three conditions.

17. (C) In a separate meeting, Deputy PM Ehud Olmert told visiting Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim that it was unclear exactly what Netanyahu wants and that some think he actually is in favor of a Gaza withdrawal. Olmert speculated that Netanyahu was worried that he, as finance minister, would be expected to muster the necessary funding to finance the withdrawal and settler compensation.

Yassin Hit Could Buoy Support for Plan

18. (SBU) Observers posit that the IDF targeted assassination of Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yassin on March 22 could weaken some Likud disengagement detractors' argument that a Gaza withdrawal will only serve to reward terrorism and could embolden Hamas to commit more terrorist acts. Mofaz announced on Israeli radio March 22, after he met with the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, that "the weaker the terror organizations in Gaza grow,...the easier it will be to carry out the disengagement plan." Reacting to the Yassin assassination, Likud MKs successfully convinced the religious Shas Party to withdraw its no-confidence motion against Sharon -- on his failure to fully disclose the details of his disengagement plan -- which Sharon would have likely won in any case.

Comment

19. (C) As the Likud faction continues to discuss Sharon's plan on March 22, Likud ministerial support for the plan appears to be contingent on U.S. political support and possibly financial backing. Netanyahu upped the ante, calling for U.S. rejection of a Palestinian right of return. Media analysis abounds that the wavering Likud ministers, and many wavering Likud MKs, are waiting to see just what in the way of support the U.S. will offer Sharon in exchange for a Gaza withdrawal and, perhaps, accompanying withdrawal of isolated settlements in the West Bank. Given the ideological and political views of those ministers opposing the plan, as well as the concerns they have raised about it, it may take more than positive U.S. statements on the plan for Sharon to win them over. It could take a change in USG policy on West Bank settlements.

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